

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USMISSION USUN
USMISSION SINAI

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 3915

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, IS
SUBJECT: THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE: A SETBACK FOR BEGIN IN THE MAKING?

REF: TEL AVIV 2311

1. SUMMARY: WHAT BRIEFLY APPEARED TO BE A DEVELOP-
ING THREE-WAY CONTEST FOR THE PRESIDENCY HAS NARROWED
WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT YITZHAK NAVON WILL NOT BE A
CANDIDATE. BEGIN'S CHOICE OF YITZHAK CHAVET, A LITTLE
KNOWN SCIENTIST, WAS MADE ONLY BECAUSE HE IS FROM THE
SEPHARDI COMMUNITY. CHAVET'S CANDIDACY HAS BEEN VERY POORLY
RECEIVED AND THERE ARE APPEALS THAT HE WITHDRAW.
IF CHAVET PERSISTS IN HIS CANDIDACY, IT COULD SPLIT HERUT AND
THE LIBERAL PARTY, WHICH IS FIRMLY SUPPORTING ELIMELECH
RIMALT. AT THIS POINT RIMALT APPEARS AHEAD. SHOULD HE WIN,
IT WOULD BE A SERIOUS BLOW TO BEGIN'S PRESTIGE. END SUMMARY
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2. THE RACE FOR PRESIDENT IS SHAPING AS A CONTEST
BETWEEN TWO CANDIDATES SPONSORED RESPECTIVELY BY THE
TWO MAIN PARTIES OF THE LIKUD BLOC. IT IS CONSEQUENTLY
BECOMING A KEEN EMBARRASSMENT TO THE GOVERNMENT, THE
LIKUD AND, IN PARTICULAR, BEGIN. NOTWITHSTANDING CONSIDERABLE
SUPPORT, LABOR PARTY MK YITZHAK NAVON

ANNOUNCED MARCH 20 HE WOULD NOT RUN FOR THE PRESIDENCY.
HE HAD PREVIOUSLY SAID HE WOULD NOT BE A CANDIDATE UNLESS HIS ELECTION

WAS ASSURED BEFOREHAND.

WITHIN A FEW HOURS THE LIBERAL PARTY'S RETIRED LEADER AND
ELDER STATEMAN, 70 YEAR OLD ELIMELECH RIMALT, AGREE TO
BE A CANDIDATE AND GO INTO DIRECT COMPETITION WITH THE
DECLARED CHOICE OF PRIME MINISTER BEGIN, YITZHAK CHAVET.

3. CRITICISM OF THE CHAVET CANDIDACY HAD ERUPTED ALMOST
AS SOON AS BEGIN MADE KNOWN HIS INTENTION TO SUPPORT THE
VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN EGYPTIAN-BORN NUCLEAR PHYSICIST SOME
TWO WEEKS AGO (REFTEL). WITHOUT BENEFIT OF PREVIOUS PUBLIC
EXPERIENCE AND AS A SCIENTIST OF RATHER COMMONPLACE REPUTA-
TION, CHAVET'S QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE JOB SEEM LIMITED TO HIS
SEPHARDI BACKGROUND. (SHORTLY AFTER PRESIDENT KATZIR
ANNOUNCED HE WOULD NOT SEEK ANOTHER TERM BEGIN SAID HE
WANTED THE NEXT PRESIDENT TO COME FOR THE SPEHARDI COMMUNITY).
NOT ONLY THE CHOICE BUT BEGIN'S IMPERIOUS MANNER OF MAKING
IT CAME UNDER FIRE. BEING APPARENTLY CONSULTED WITH
HARDLY ANYONE BEFORE CHOOSING CHAVET. (HAIM LANDAU IS ALLEGED TO
BE CHAVET'S PATRON) WHLE THIS METHOD OF DECISION-MAKING IS FAR FROM
UNUSUAL FOR BEGIN, MANY ISRAELIS, REGARDLESS OF PARTY, BELIEVE
THAT NOMINATIONS FOR THE OFFICE OF PRESIDENT DESERVED SOMETHING
CLOSER TO CONSENSUS THAT FIAT.

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4. IT WAS ALL ALONG ASSUMED THAT WHOMEVER BEGIN AND THE
LIKUD CHOSE WOULD EASILY BE THE FRONTRUNNER IF A CONTEST
DEVELOPED. AS A SEPHARDI AND RELATIVELY NON-CONTROVERSIAL
AND DISTINGUISHED POLITICAIN, NAVON WAS VIEWED AS A VIABLE
ALTERNATIVE SHOULD BEGIN PROVE SUFFIEIENTLY ECUMENICAL
TO REACH OUT TO SOMEONE FROM THE OPPOSITION.

RIMALT'S CANDIDACY

WAS PUT ON ICE IN VIEW OF BEGIN'S INTENTION TO NOMINATE A
SEPHARDI

THE NEGATIVE REACTION TO BEGIN'S CHOICE OF CHAVET SPURRED THE
UNDECLARED CANDIDACY OF NAVON AND RESURRECTED THAT OF RIMALT.

5. UNTIL HE TOOK HIMSELF OUT OF THE RUNNING, NAVON
APPEARED TO HAVE AN EDGE IN THE RACE. IN ADDITION TO THE ALIGNMENT
AND SEVERAL OF THE ONE-AND-TWO MEMBER KNESSET FACTIONS, HE
COULD HAVE COUNTED ON THE DMC AND MOST OF THE NRP. PUNDITS WERE
GIVING HIM 61 OR 62 VOTES, POSSIBLY MORE. GOWEVER, NAVON
HAD LOST THE 1973 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND LATER MISSED OUT ON
THE KNESSET SPEAKERSHIP* HE KNEW THAT BEGIN COULD EXERT GREAT
PRESSURE ON BEHALF OF HIS CANDIDATE AND DID NOT WANT TO
RISK BEING A THREE-TIME LOSER.

6. THE CANDIDACY OF RIMALT, WHO IN THE 60S OPPOSED THE LIBERALS' JOINING HERUT TO FORM THE GAHAL BLOC, IS THREATENING A DEEP SPLIT IN THE LIKUD--TO SAY NOTHING OF THE COALITION. AWARE THAT CHAVET'S CANDIDACY IS UN-POPULAR IN THE PRESS AND AMONG VOCAL ISRAELIS, THE LIBERAL PARTY IS STANDING FAST BEHIND RIMALT. ALTHOUGH PRIVATELY UNHAPPY WITH CHAVET, MANY HERUT MKS ARE DUTI-FULLY LINING UP IN SUPPORT OF BEGIN'S CHOICE.

7. AS THE DEADLINE FOR FILING ON MARCH 26 APPROACHES, RIMALT'S CHANCES LOOK GOOD. HE HAS THE LIBERAL PARTY AND MOST OF THOSE WHO HAD SUPPORTED NAVON. BEGIN THUS APPEARS HEADED FOR A SERIOUS SETBACK UNLESS HE DROPS CHAVET. CHAVET SAYS THAT HE WILL WITHDRAW ONLY IF THE PRIME MINISTER
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SO REQUESTS. CRITICS ARE SAYING THAT IT IS IRONIC THAT BEGIN, WHO AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS ADMINISTRATION SAID SO MUCH ABOUT INCREASING THE STATURE AND PRESTIGE OF THE PRESIDENCY, SEEMS TO BE DEMEANING IT BY HIS CHOICE OF A NON-ENTITY. MEANWHILE, WITH BEGIN IN WASHINGTON, THERE IS INCREAS-ING TALK OF POSTPONING THE ELECTION IN THE HOPE THAT, GIVEN ENOUGH TIME, BEGIN WILL BE ABLE TO EXTRICATE HIMSELF FROM WHAT APPEARS TO BE A GROWING POLITICAL QUAGMIRE OF HIS OWN MAKING. WITH MALICE OF FORETHOUGHT, MK SHULAMIT ALONE HAS SUGGESTED THAT IF BEGIN RAN FOR THE PRESIDENCY, HE WOULD BE ELECTED UNANI-MOUSLY.
VIETS

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